

Duxbury Rural & Historical Society's

Sarah Wingate Taylor Fall Lecture Series
presents

**"The Gurnet Lighthouse:
Was Hannah Thomas the
Keeper?"**

a presentation by educator and historian

Ellen Shockro

A lighthouse has stood majestically at the tip of the Gurnet since 1710. Ellen Shockro began researching lighthouses built before the American Revolution and became fascinated with the Gurnet Lighthouse and the story of Hannah Thomas. She will speak to us on the mysteries she has solved and bring to life a piece of local history.

Thursday, October 23, 1997

Presentation to be held at:

The Ellison Center for the Arts

Refreshments at 7:30 p.m.

Lecture at 8:00 p.m.

A Donation of \$5 is Suggested

*3 copies of handout
attached*



Gurnet Point Lighthouse and Hannah Thomas: List of Attached Documents

Information: All of these are numbered for your reference. Most of the documents were found either at Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston, where they have the John Thomas papers, or at the Massachusetts State Archives, also in Boston, where most public records are deposited, either on microfilm or actually kept there, as I have explained.

For anyone who wishes to write, email, fax, or speak with me, here are the appropriate numbers:

Ellen Shockro, Ph.D. Fax is 714 675-0794; email is "eshockro@aol.com";
P.O. Box 3369 Phone is 714 673-3850.
Newport Beach, CA 92659

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2. Agreement to build lighthouse on land provided by the John and Hannah Thomas and John Thomas, Nov. 23rd, 1768.
3. Note from John to Hannah, spring 1775, when he is at Roxbury camp in Boston, referring to one John Soul who is keeping the Gurnet.
4. Letter to General John Thomas, who had announced he was going to resign his commission, from General George Washington, dated July 23rd, 1775.
5. Letter from John to Hannah, March 8th, 1776.
6. Letter from Hannah to John, March 12th, 1776.
7. Will of John Thomas, written May 31st, 1776, while he lay dying in Quebec in Canada, of small pox, and he actually died on June 2nd, 1776.
8. Will of Hannah Thomas, recorded July 5th, 1819, she died on April 1, 1819.
9. Resolve of Massachusetts State Assembly, confirmed by the Senate, accepting Hannah Thomas' Memorial which explained why the Lighthouse and the lands at the Gurnet belonged to her and her heirs, and repealing a resolve that had been passed on 2nd July 1783 assigning it to another. This is dated February 25th, 1785.
10. Draft of Resolve, later adopted, written by Artemus Ward, Speaker and affirmed by Samuel Phillips, President of the Senate, in which amount Hannah Thomas, officially responsible for the keeper, is crossed out (one hundred twenty) and changed to eighty pounds.

II. Hannah Thomas at Gurnet Point Light, Massachusetts, 1776-1786

What is actually known about Hannah Thomas could be related in a sentence or two because the records are so scanty. Her story can only be fleshed out by reciting the history of her time and what is known about her lighthouse.

The first lighthouse at Gurnet Point was erected in 1768. The structure was 30 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 20 feet high, with a lantern on each end containing two lamps in each, the first American "twin lights." The lanterns, which protected the lamps against the weather, were constructed of heavy wooden frames holding small, thick panes of glass. These twin lanterns, were easily distinguishable from nearby Barnstable Light, and could be lined up by mariners, giving an exact location at that one point.

In Hannah's era the lighthouse keeper's job was a seven-day-a-week responsibility. The two lamps in each lantern at Gurnet Point had to be lit and kept burning every night of the week, every day of the year. When Hannah took charge, the tallow candles used in the earliest lanterns in the colonies had been abandoned, for their light was too feeble to be visible from any distance. She tended four flat-wick lamps (also called bucket lamps) without any reflecting apparatus, each having four large wicks.

The lamps burned whale oil, which gave off a large amount of smoke and soot, dimming the light and hazing over the glass around the lantern. Hannah had to replenish the oil in the lamps two or three times during the night, trim the wicks, and wipe the glass clean. At dawn, she extinguished the lamps and cleaned them.

The American colonists were very dependent on the sea, not only for traveling from place to place, but for fish to eat and for transporting supplies and manufactured goods along the coast and to and from Europe. Ship captains had such a dire

Women Who Kept the Lights

by Mary Louise and J. Candace Clifford, 1993. ⁵

Know all men by these Presents, that we John
Thomas of Kingston in the county of Plymouth &
Province of the Massachusetts Bay in new England Esq.
Hannah Thomas the wife of the aforesaid John Thomas
and John Thomas of Plymouth in said county of Plymouth
gentlemen, being owners of a certain Island or Piece of
land commonly called and known by the name of the
Gunnet lying & being at the Entrance of Plymouth
Harbour in said Town & county of Plymouth, For
livers good causes & reasons us thereunto moving and for
and in consideration of the sum of five shillings in full
money of the Province aforesaid to us in hand Paid (the
Receipt whereof we do hereby acknowledge) by Gamaliel
Bradford of Dunborough Esq., James Warren of Plymouth
Esq. and Anthony Thomas of Marshfield Gentleman, all
of the County & Province aforesaid, being a Committee
appointed by the next General Court of the said Province
of the Massachusetts Bay, to build a Light House on the
Gunnet near Plymouth Harbour, and to agree with the
Builder or Builders of the said Light House for the Building
of Building a Light House there, So hereby give, grant,
confer, confirm unto them the said Gamaliel
Bradford, James Warren and Anthony Thomas, their heirs
and assigns full and free Liberty of
Building and supporting a Light House on said Gunnet
in such a Place as they shall appear most convenient
as also the Liberty of Building & repairing the same
said Light House over the said Gunnet, and of Landing
at Building to and from said Gunnet by Boat or other Vessels
and other Craft, and of Landing from time to time such
Fuel as Coal, Wood, Iron and other Articles & Materials
as shall be necessary for the Building and supporting
of said Light House, and also for the Building of a Wharf
from said Light House, at any time hereafter it shall
be found necessary and convenient, and in general all
other Liberties and Privileges that do or ought to belong
to a Light House. — To have & to hold the same to them the
said Gamaliel Bradford, James Warren and Anthony
Thomas and their Successors in said trust, to and for
the use of the Province aforesaid, so long as said General
Court of Province shall think proper to keep up and
support a Light House on said Gunnet. — Always
Reserving to us the said John, Hannah and John
our heirs & assigns, the Offer, Benefit and Privilege

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Of keeping and tending said Light House, in case we
shall and will make and faithfully perform the same,
paying on such growth as said Province shall from time
to time make for said services. - In Witness whereof we have
hereunto set our hands & seals this twenty third of November
anno Domini 1768. - John Thomas (seal) Hannah Thomas (seal) (Wm. Thomas)
Sigs. Seal & Deed.

In Presence of
Saml. Coon,
Elizabeth Hales.

Roxbury to Kingston 23rd Feb^y
1769. - John Thomas (seal),
Wm. Hannah Thomas (wife of John)
John) and John Thomas acknowledge
the within & above written instrument
to be their act & Deed. - Before
Willm. Lever Just: Pacis. -

Received April 28th 1769. - Recorded of John Cotton Reg^r

A true Copy as appears of Record. - Examined by John Cotton Reg^r

I have just received a letter by Col. James
 I am sorry that Lord has not resolution to
 stay on the Gurnet. I am sorry to have the shock
 more & you may let him know that if he will
 stay there & take prudent care of the stock & drive
 them up the Beach if any danger appear I will
 request the cows if lost I can't think the danger is
 so great as they conceive nothing would give me greater
 pleasure than to be relieved from here with Honor & to
 return home but my friends will not hear of it at
 present. I have sent you some little trifles for your
 daughter which was taken from some thieves who
 can't find the owner tho' of little value it may be
 pleasing to her. I have sent you a little coffee
 I have wrote you several letters that you have
 not rec'd I must leave the conducting your affairs
 to you. I am your affectionate husband
 Norwich Tuesday P.m. July 7. J. H. Thorne.

Cambridge July 25. 1775.

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Sir

The Retirement of a general Officer,
 preserving the confidence of his Country & the Army, at so critical
 a Period, appears to me to be big with fatal Consequences
 both to the Publick Cause, & his own Reputation. While
 it is ~~unexcused~~ ^{unexcused}, I think it my Duty to make this last Effort
 to prevent it; & after suggesting those Reasons which occur
 to me against your Resignation, your own Wisdom & good
 Sense must decide upon it. In the usual Contests of
 Empire, & Ambition, the Conscience of a Soldier has little
 Share, that he may very properly erect upon this Claim of
 Rank, & extend his Pretensions, even to Punilios: but in such
 a Cause as this, where the Object is neither Glory nor Retard of
 Territory, but a Defence of all that is dear & valuable in Life,
 surely every Part ought to be deemed honourable in which
 a Man can serve his Country. What Matters of Triumph
 will it afford our Enemies, that in less than one Month,
 a Spirit of discord should shew itself in the highest Ranks
 of the Army, not to be extinguished by any Thing less than
 a total Desertion of Duty? How little Reason shall we
 have to boast of American Unity, or ^{Union} ~~Union~~ if a ~~Union~~ ^{Union}
 ~~Union~~ in such a Cause, matter of partial Considerations
 cannot give Way to the great of general Interest. These
 Remarks can only affect you as a Member of the great
 American Body; but as an Inhabitant of Massachusetts
 Bay, your own Province, & the other Colonies have a particular

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you cannot refuse them, without relinquishing, in some Degree
that Character for publick Virtue & Honour, which you have hitherto
supported. ... Your Cause is just, it ought to be supported, but
where shall it find Support, if Gentlemen of all Sorts of Temperaments
unable to conquer the Prejudices of a long Education, withdraw their
votum in an Hour of Danger. ... I admit, Sir, that your Cause
hitherto has not had due Respect - it is by no means a
singular Case, worthy the Attention of all Nations of Gentlemen, but
Reason to make the same Compliment, but they did not for
this abandon the publick Cause, they nobly stifled the Dictate
of Recrimination, & made their Enemies ashamed of their Ingratitude.
And can America show no such Instances of Magnanimity?
For the sake of your bleeding Country, your devoted Provinces,
Charter Rights, & by the Memory of those brave Men who have
already fell in this great Cause, I conjure you to banish
from your Mind every Suggestion of Anger & Disappointment - that
your Country will do ample Justice to your Merits - that
already do it, by the Sorrow & Regret expressed on the Coast
and the Sacrifices you are called to make, will in the Shape
of every good Man, & every Man of his Country, do you more than
renew the most distinguished Victory. ...

You possess the Confidence & Affection of the People
of this Province particularly; many of them are not capable
of judging the Propriety of Reasons of your Conduct - should
they esteem themselves authorized by your Example to
be ... Inconveniences may be fatal & irremediable.

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Men & their Officers, of the Obligations that are upon them to arise from these Attachments. But, as the other (Gentlemen have) also their Country upon you, not only as a Nation of America, but an Inhabitant of this Province. They have made common Cause with it, they have encompassed their Trade, loaded themselves with Taxes & are ready to spill their Blood in Vindication of the Rights of Massachusetts Bay, while all the Security of Profit of a Neutrality has been offered them. But no Arts or Temptations could induce them from your Side, I leave you to say it is a cruel & perfidious Ministry. And their Reflections must have some Weight, with a Mind as generous & candid as mine.

How will you be able to answer it to your Country & your own Conscience, if the Step you are about to take should lead to a Division of the Empire, which would be ascribed to Measures which your Councils & Conduct could have prevented? Before it is too late. I entreat you, you would weigh well the great Step you take upon how much smaller Circumstances the Fate of Empire has depended. If your own Honour & Reputation you are the best of only men, bid allow me to say, that a People contending for Liberty are seldom disposed to look with a favourable Eye upon either Men or Measures which oppose, or tend to a compromise with their inalienable Rights. As to myself

that your duty to your Country, your Patrie, if you will
explicitly require your Continuance in the Service & the
Order of Rank of the Commission is under the Conviction
of the Continental Congress, where Determination will be
received in a few Days. I may argue a Want of Respect
that August Body not to wait the Decision: But at all
I shall flatter myself that these Reasons with others which
your own ^{good} Judgment will suggest, will strengthen your
Mind against those Impulses which are incident
Humanity & laudable in a certain Degree; and that
Result will be, your Resolution is a proof your Country
in this Day of Distress - That you may reap the full
Reward of Honour, & publick Esteem which such a Con-
duct deserves is the sincere Wish of

Sir

Yours very Obedt^t Servant

Wm. Smith

E. P. H. R.

my Dear wife

I was the Pleasur'd & Receiv'd your by
such unknown hand of the 11th Instant which
gave me much Satisfaction to hear that my wife
& Family are well I Rec'd the account Inclosed
which is Twenty Two Dollars & Eleven Pence Half
over I have sent you Twenty Five Dollars I would
have you Pay him his account I had much rather
if it could be you would Purchase you wood I should
think not I am sure I am sure it for you the money
that it be punctually Paid however if it can't be Purch'd
you must get it from the Lath John Paul. Inform me
his father Don't Chuse to Continue at the Gussett
if so it will not do to leave it wholely the Building
will be finally Destroyed I would have you send or
Go to John Hunt of Duxbury I see what he saith
about if he declines to go there he may let me
know his Terms or if he could come here I would
agree with him upon the matter I don't at Present
know of any one that would suit better if he don't
decline you will let me know by the first opportunity
We are very busy about this Time John is well
I shall write by the first opportunity I am
your Affectionate Son

J^r. Thomas

March 18th 1776

Cobb will give you a Receipt for this money

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Hingham March 12 day 1776

my Ever Dear husband

I Post you yesterday by postler which I hope you will
Receive this Night an opportunity. Presents by m^r Sever
I cannot deny my self the Pleasure of scribbling a few Lines
to my Dearest friend it is all the Pleasure I can Take
in his absence and Receiving from him wartermen
Thomas was hear this Day from Providence he left
with me the sum of Note which he Took up for you he
Paid me forty Two Shillings and six pence old Tenner which
was more then was Due upon the Note I have cut out your
Name and laid it up That you may see that it is last
Right: it is almost Time to Think of Farming as the
winter is almost gon the fences are much Broken down
Should be Glad you would Direct us where we shall get
some Posts to mend it up: we have had very hy winds of late
which has Destroyed much fences hear m^r Cobb will Take
a Piece of Land to Plant for corn to the halfe if you like
it the Peace Next the Ry field which will Take in them
Bays that lead to the woods and Prevent so much Carting
Throw our Pasture Deddish Holmes has Brought Two
hundred & fifty Cows from the Swamp as far as
Longony he will Bring them hear in a few Days which is
all you have at the Swamp may God Preserve you from
Every Evil and Return you safely is the Earnest Request
of your Ever Expectinate wife

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Hannah Thomas

In the Name of God Amen I John Thomas
of Hingham in the County of Plymouth & Colony of the Massachusetts
Bay being now at Chamber in the Province of New-
boscawen formerly Afflicted with the Small Pox of Scurvy and
& Memory do make this my Last Will & Testament And
Dispose of the Estate which the Almighty hath Blessed me
with in Manner and Form Following that is to say —
I give I will that my Debts be paid out of my said Estate
Item I Give & Bequeath to my Dearly Beloved Wife Hannah the
Whole of my Personal Estate for her to Dispose of as she
sees fit & the whole of my Real Estate I Give & Bequeath
to my said Wife for & During the Term of her Natural
Life & do hereby empower her my said Wife to Dispose of
my said Real Estate to my Children by her Last-
Will & Testament or other Writing by her subscribed
During the Term of her Natural Life in such Manner
& Proportion as to her shall seem Meet And I Do-
hereby Appoint my said Wife Hannah Thomas the
Sole Executrix of this my Last Will & Testament —
The said John Thomas Esq^r Delivered the foregoing
Instrument and Declared it to be such in the Presence
of us & desired us to sign the same This Thirty first
Day of May in the Year of Christ 1776.

Attest Samuel Brewster
Joshua Thomas

State of Massachusetts Bay }
Plymouth Co. } To all People unto whom these Presents
shall come William Sever Esq^r Judge of the Probate of
Wills &c within & for the County of Plymouth doth Greeting.
Know that that upon the Day of the Date hereof before me

... I will that my Debt be paid out of my said Estate

And I Give & Bequeath to my Dearly Beloved Wife Hannah the Whole of my Personal Estate for her to Dispose of as she sees fit & the whole of my Real Estate I Give & Bequeath to my said Wife for & During the Term of her Natural Life & do hereby Impower her my said Wife to Dispose of my said Real Estate to my Children by her Last Will & Testament or other Writing by her Subscribed During the Term of her Natural Life in such Manner & Proportion as to her shall seem Meet And I do hereby Appoint my said Wife Hannah Thomas the Sole Executrix of this my Last Will & Testament & The said John Thomas Esq^r Delivered the foregoing Instrument and Declared it to be such in the Presence of us & Desired us to sign the same This Thirty first Day of May in the Year of Christ 1776.

Attest Samuel Brewer
Joshua Thomas

State of Massachusetts Bay
Plymouth Co. } To all People unto whom these Presents shall come William Sever Esq^r Judge of the Probate of Wills &c within & for the County of Plymouth Greeting
Know ye that upon the Day of the Date hereof before me at Kingston in said County the Instrument purporting the Last Will & Testament of John Thomas of Kingston in said County Esq^r Deceased was Presented for Probate by Hannah Thomas Widow Relict of the said Deceased when Samuel Brewer & Joshua Thomas the Witnesses whose names are there Subscribed made Oath that they heard him Publish & Declare the same as his Last Will & Testament that he was then

Resolved that the owner or owners of the said Island and their Heirs & Assignes shall on or before the first Day of January every Year, certify to the Governor for the Term being, in writing, the Name of the Person to whose immediate care the said Lighthouse shall be committed who shall be subject to such Rules relating to the keeping & tending the said Lighthouse as the Governor with the advice of the Council shall from time to time order and appoint

Resolved that the selectmen of the Town of Plymouth or their successors in office, be and they are hereby empowered to inspect the said Lighthouse & see that the same be well tended & kept, and make report thereof to the Governor once at least in every Year

Resolved, The resolve of the General Court passed the 2 July 1783, so far as it relates to keeping & tending the Lighthouse on the said Island, be & hereby is repeated

Sent up for concurrence
A. Ward. Speaker

In Senate March 15. 1780 Read & concurred with an
amendment at A & B -

Sent down for concurrence
Sam^l Phillips jun^r - President

A. dole "Feb^y 23. 1769" & insert Nov^r 23. 1768

B. dole "23. 3rd Feb^y 1769" & insert 23rd of Nov^r. 1768

In the House of Representatives

Approved

James Bowdoin

March 11. 1780

Read and concurred

A. Ward. Speaker

Commonwealth } In the House
Massachusetts } of Representatives
Nov 13th 1786

10

The committee appointed to
report an Establishment for the
Speaker of the ^{House} Light on the
Gunnet at the Entrance of
Clymouth Harbour, do leave
to report the following Res-
olves;

Resolved That
there be allowed ^{out of the public Treasury} & paid to
Hannah Thomas Keeper of
said Light House for herself
and such assistants as she
shall procure, ^{Eighty} ~~one hundred~~
~~and twenty~~ Rounds per
Annum.

And be it further Resolved,
That there be paid out of
the public Treasury to the
said Hannah Thomas ~~one~~
~~hundred~~ ^{Eighty} ~~and twenty~~ Rounds
in full for her services, &
such assistants as she employed,
to the Tenth Day of September
last,

but for concurrence
Antemas Ward Speakers

In Senate Nov 17th 1786

Read and concurred as to them
into a new draft - sent down for concurrence

Sam^l Phillips J. Pres.

For the House of Representatives Nov 17th 1786

Approved

Read and concurred.

James Bowdoin

Artemas Ward Speaker

Before making an
Establishment for the
Legislative House, at the
General Court, etc.